DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 036 275 HE 001 373

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TITLE	GRADES AND ACADEMIC STANDARDS.
INSTITUTION	CITY UNIV. OF NEW YORK, N.Y. BROOKLYN COLL.
PUB DATE	69
NOTE	6P.
EDRS PRICE	EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.40
DESCRIPTORS	*ACADEMIC STANDARDS, EVALUATION METHODS, *GRADES (SCHOLASTIC), *GRADING, *HIGHER EDUCATION, *PASS FAIL GRADING, TESTS

ABSTRACT

AS FAR AS STUDENTS ARE CONCERNED, THE REAL TYRRANY EXERCISED BY THE UNIVERSITY IS IN THE CLASSROOM WHERE GRADES MAY DECIDE A STUDENT'S FATE. THE GRADING SYSTEM HAS, THEREFORE, BECOME A MAJOR TARGET OF RADICAL STUDENTS AND FACULTY. SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN THE GRADING SYSTEM WILL PROBABLY NOT BE MADE UNTIL PROVISIONS ARE MADE FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF ACADEMIC STANDARDS. THIS COULD BE ACCOMPLISHED BY USING THE PASS-FAIL SYSTEM IN THE CLASSROOM AND LETTER GRADES IN DEPARTMENTAL EXAMS. THESE EXAMS WOULD GENERALLY ONLY BE TAKEN BY THOSE WHO INTENDED TO MAJOR OR MINOR IN A FIELD AND WOULD BE TAKEN WHEN ENTERING THAT FIELD AND WHEN COMPLETING IT. WITHOUT THE GRADES, WORK IN THE CLASSROOM WOULD HAVE TO BE MEANINGFUL IN ITSELF; AND WITHOUT THE TEACHER AS THE SOLE JUDGE OF ONE'S PERFORMANCE, BOTH TEACHING AND LEARNING WOULD BECOME MORE STIMULATING EXPERIENCES. STUDENTS SHOULD ALSO BE ALLOWED TO QUESTION THE RELEVANCY OF PARTICULAR QUESTIONS ON EXAMS. THE ENSUING PUBLIC DEBATE WOULD BE USEFUL TO THE TEACHER WHO MUST DESIGN THE EXAM AS WELL AS TO THE STUDENTS IN HELPING TO RAISE THE INTELLECTUAL LEVEL OF THE COLLEGE. (AF)

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GRADES AND ACADEMIC STANDARDS

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It is difficult to predict anything in history, and particularly so in the middle of a revolution. But I believe that as far as the student revolution is concerned, most of the changes that are being instituted will not affect the colleges as much as the radical students hope or the conservative teachers fear. To dress as they like, smoke what they want, and to have a voice in the hiring of teachers and the determination of the curriculum will not affect the education of students as long as the classroom remains the same. For it is in the classroom, after all, that the students become part of the college or university. If the classroom continues to be a place where the student must receive a grade from the teacher, then changing attendance regulations, updating the course, or changing the instructor, will not make very much difference. For it is in the classroom, not in the faculty councils or deans' offices, that the real tyranny--as far as the students are concerned--exists.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the grading system is now becoming a major target of radical students and teachers. But despite growing support throughout the country for limiting

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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grades to a pass or fail, and even for abolishing all grades, I do not think that any really significant changes will come about unless some provision is also made for the maintenance of academic standards. For it is unlikely that teachers, at any rate, will want to give up some way of determining competence and excellence in their disciplines. A reformation of the present grading system will not succeed, nor should it, if it results in a lowering of our standards for competency and a disregard of our attempts to encourage excellence. My proposal, therefore, is designed to free the classroom from the tyranny of grades while still providing a way of measuring and rewarding competence and excellence. In brief, I propose that in the classroom we have only a pass-fail system, and that letter grades (the only grades that would really count) be given only in departmental exams. These departmental exams would be taken, for the most part, only by those who intend to major or to minor in a field, and would be taken both upon entering a particular field and upon completing one's major. In general, a student would take one or two departmental examinations in his sophomore year (or at the end of his freshman year) to determine whether he is capable of specializing in a particular field. He would also take one or two comprehensive examinations in his senior year to determine his competence for advanced professional work.

The departments could use a conventional grading system in their examinations, and so recommend for graduate or professional work only those students whose grade is quite good. But if a student doesn't wish to "major" in anything; if he wants only to satisfy his intellectual curiosity, he could, under this system, take no examinations at all, receive no grades, and take a "pass" degree. In any case, a student would be obliged to prove his competence only in those fields in which he has a vocational interest. Of course, a student would have to show a minimum degree of competence to receive a "pass"--but few students have any difficulty in getting a "D" grade.

The details of my plan would have to be worked out, and I am sure that many changes would have to be made. Small departments for example, would have to join with departments in other colleges in order to give an examination, since in such a department it would be difficult to remove one's teacher from the board of examiners. But such matters can be worked out by faculty-student committees. What I am concerned with here is not a blueprint but an attitude towards the classroom. What I would like to see, and what I believe my proposal would accomplish, is a liberation of the classroom from the tyranny of the grade. Without the grade, the work in the classroom would have to be meaningful in itself. The discussion would have to help the student's own development. No longer could a student sit in his chair taking down notes which

he would later give back to his teacher. Even for those students who intend to take the departmental examinations could not get by with note-taking and yea-saying. For if the teacher is not the sole author and judge of the examination (in some cases he may have nothing to do with it), then the student is responsible for incorporating what is said in the classroom with what he already knows about the subject. He must become, or try to become, a critical thinker rather than a parrot.

For the teacher the challenge is also greater, obviously. A student who sits in his class must find the discussion or the lecture interesting or useful on the student's own terms. The teacher will have to either help the student to really master his subject so that the mastery will be recognized by impartial judges. Or the teacher will attempt to make his course interesting in itself, to stimulate the intellectual development of all the students, regardless of whether they ever take an examination in that field. Of course, most teachers will try to do both.

Not only the classroom, but even the examination could take on new meaning under my proposal. Divorced from the classroom and from the individual teacher, the examination can make its own contributions to the intellectual life of the college. It would, of course, retain its practical purpose of encouraging the competent and discouraging the incompetent from entering a field as a major. But it can also do much more. For to elect

an examination committee within a college (or a university or a region) to make up an examination, which would then be taken by all students, and in which sample papers with different grades are made public, is to participate in a public debate on some fundamental issues within a discipline. If students were allowed to question the relevancy or the clarity of a question or an answer, the resulting discussion might prove to be significant. When a teacher is forced to defend a question or an answer in public--to both students and colleagues--he may very well be uncovering fundamental assumptions about his discipline. And such a discussion, particularly in the humanities, may make us think more deeply about the real questions in our disciplines, questions which get to the heart of what we are doing, or think we are doing. A university-wide debate, for example, about what are the really significant and answerable questions about the meaning of a novel, or about the criteria for an adequate interpretation of a historical event, would prove more significant intellectually than most of the research that is done in these fields. (I have some reason for believing that a debate about what is a good exam in the natural sciences might also be useful.)

This change in grading can thus be useful not only to students but to all of us who wish to raise the intellectual level of the colleges. Instead of graduating students who have learned, for the most part, how to give the instructor what he wants, we can devise our comprehensive examinations so as to force students to

organize their knowledge around some basic problem. In fact, a comprehensive examination in some fields might consist of a research project in which the student applies what he has learned to the solution of a genuine problem, either practical or theoretical.

But again, my aim here is not to go into details. What I hope to have shown here is simply that the removal of grades from the classroom need not result in a lowering of our standards, but an opportunity to raise the intellectual level of both the classroom and the examination. It is not only the freedom <u>from</u> grades that we should seek, but the freedom <u>to</u> make education more demanding and more relevant to the needs of the student and the needs of society.

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